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E.H. Carr, Isaac Deutscher, Roman Rosdolsky, and the making of history

Michael Cox

E.H.Carr and Isaac Deutscher were by any measure the two most important left-wing historians working in Britain during the Cold War. Their work not only led to both to being attacked by both conservatives and liberals at the time. They also found themselves subject in 1963 to a powerful broadside authored by Roman Rosdolsky, the Ukrainian Marxist now living in the USA. In his attack Rosdolsky berated the two together for failing to explain in Marxist terms the role (or otherwise) played by 'accident' and the 'individual' in history. This article examines the Carr-Deutscher relationship, what united and what divided them, and why they found themselves subject to Rosdolsky's detailed critique.

Keywords: Roman Rosdolsky; Isaac Deutscher; E.H.Carr; Lenin; Trotsky; The Role of Accident and the Individual in History

One of the more interesting intellectual partnerships on the left forged during the Cold War was that struck by the British historian Edward Hallett Carr and Trotsky's biographer, Isaac Deutscher.[1] It was, as Tamara Deutscher later observed, a 'puzzling' meeting of minds.[2] Carr after all was a middle-class English diplomat who had joined the Foreign Office back in 1916 before resigning to take up a university position in 1936 in order (amongst other things) to make the intellectual case for appeasement. Educated in Cambridge, a long-time associate of the Royal Institute of Affairs in

[1] There are two sources from which I draw here. They are the Carr papers (Birmingham University, https://calmview.bham.ac.uk/GetDocument.ashx?db=Catalog&fname=E±H±Carr.pdf) and the papers of Isaac Deutscher located in the International Institute of Social History (IISH) Amsterdam. The latter were acquired from Tamara Deutscher in 1977. The article by Rosdolsky in the original German is in the archives in Amsterdam and was drawn to my attention by one of the great stalwarts of of the IISH, Marcel van der Linden. It is to Marcel and the IISH that *Critique* owes its thanks and expresses its deep appreciation here. According to Marcel, the original Rosdolsky document is catalogued as item 40 in the Roman Rosdolsky Papers, also held at the Institute.

[2] Tamara Deutscher, 'E.H. Carr: A Personal Memoir', *New Left Review*, No. 137, January–February 1983, pp. 78–86.

London and a friend of the great and good – during World War II he wrote 'leads' for the *Times* – Carr was by any measure a most unlikely dissident.[3]

Deutscher, on the other hand, was almost destined to rebel. Born to an orthodox Jewish family in 1907 in Austria-Poland, where 'three empires met', he grew up in a decidedly cosmopolitan environment where Jews lived alongside Germans and both shared the same territorial space with Poles and Czechs. Forever destined to be an outsider, he first rejected his faith and then, in 1926, joined the Polish Communist Party only to be expelled from it in 1932 for having questioned the 'General Line' laid down by the Comintern on the nature of fascism and social democracy ('twins' not enemies, it claimed). Finally, in April 1939, he left Warsaw for England by way of Paris. He arrived knowing little English, though soon made contact with a small band of Trotskyists, and even wrote for one of their publications under the *nom de guerre* 'Joseph Bren'. It was by any measure a precarious existence only sustained by his political journalism and writing for publications such as the *Economist* and the *Observer* on Soviet affairs.[4]

What in the end brought a one-time member of the British foreign policy establishment and a revolutionary in exile together was of course their shared interest in the fate of the Soviet Union. However, both came at the subject from almost opposite ends – Carr as someone who viewed the USSR less as a radical critic who felt the revolution had been betrayed and more as a (reasonably successful) experiment in planning, Deutscher as a Marxist who, in his own words, believed the revolution remained unfinished.[5] Carr was certainly influenced by Marx and until the end of his life was an admirer of what he insisted had been achieved by the Soviet Union from the 1930s onwards (though interestingly his massive *History of Soviet Russia* conlcuded in 1929). Nevertheless he was not a Marxist himself. In fact, he later argued that a classless society was impossible and that all societies needed a ruling class. This was not a view which would have recommended itself to Deutscher. In fact, tellingly, he once criticized Carr's understanding of the Russian revolution, arguing that, for all his merits as an historian of the Bolshevik revolution (and they were considerable in his view), Carr only looked at what happened in 1917 as a stepping stone to the creation of a new unified state under Lenin rather than a revolutionary upheaval inspired by a set of ideas whose goal was nothing less than the creation of a new order.[6]

Their paths finally crossed in 1947. By this time Carr had already established a reputation as a scholar of international relations, a lead writer for the *Times* (sometimes referred to by enemies as the 'journal of the London School of Economics'!)[7] and a Russian expert who, though not uncritical of Stalinism – unlike the Webbs

[3] See Jonathan Haslam, *The Vices of Integrity: E. H. Carr 1892–1982* (London: Verso, 1999).

[4] Isaac Deutscher, 'Curriculum Vitae', 25 August 1959.

[5] Isaac Deutscher, The *Unfinished Revolution, 1917–1967* (Oxford University Press, 1967).

[6] Isaac Deutscher, 'Mr E.H. Carr as Historian of Soviet Russia', *Soviet Studies*, VI, April 1955:4, pp. 337–350.

[7] The Duke of Devonshire in 1943 quoted in Charles Jones, *E.H. Carr and International Relations: A Duty to Lie*, Cambridge University Press, 1998, p. 97.

at the LSE or George Bernard Shaw – did insist that planning in the Soviet system had many social and economic achievements to its name. Moreover, as a result of the war and the emergence of the USSR to 'great power' status, the only road to a stable post-war order required some kind of working relationship with Moscow. This not only ran counter to the emerging Cold War consensus in the West; it also led him (controversially) to consign the small nations of Eastern Europe to a new Soviet sphere of influence.[8]

Deutscher meanwhile was engaged in writing what turned out to be his first major book, his 1949 biography of Stalin,[9] criticized by an anti-Stalinist like Max Schactman for providing what he termed a 'theoretical basis for a socialist capitulation to Stalinism',[10] but much admired and reviewed by Carr, whose own views of Stalin were perhaps a little less critical than they might have been.[11] Clearly they had a great deal in common, being both political outsiders in an increasingly cold climate as well as public intellectuals committed to understanding how the Soviet Union had not only survived in a hostile capitalist environment but had later gone on to defeat the greatest military threat in history in the shape of Nazi Germany. By the late 1940s they were also engaged in their different ways in challenging the by then official view that the Soviet Union represented a serious military or even revolutionary threat to the West.[12] Indeed, in Deutscher's opinion – one shared by Carr – Stalin for all his rhetorical bluster was no revolutionary hell-bent on spreading communism around the world. That privilege had once fallen to Trotsky and he ('the Prophet', as Deutscher referred to him in his trilogy) had first been outcast and then murdered by the Stalinist system.[13]

By far and away the best source for understanding the nature of their relationship is their extensive correspondence, beginning in 1947 and ending 20 years later when Deutscher suddenly died while on a trip to Italy. The letters not only reveal how close they were to become personally, but also how much they seemed to rely on each other intellectually, in spite of their differences. They also used their positions as increasingly well-known public intellectuals to support each other. Thus whenever he could (which was often) Carr wrote positively about Deutscher's books, including his Stalin biography, 'brilliant … the most satisfactory … in any language', he

[8] For a fuller discussion of Carr's views on nationalism and the nation-state, see my new 'Introduction' to E.H. Carr's 1945 volume *Nationalism & After*. Palgrave, 2021, pp. xiii-lvi.

[9] Isaac Deutscher, *Stalin: A Political Biography* (London: Oxford University Press, 1949).

[10] Quote from https://www.marxists.org/archive/shachtma/1950/09/deutscher-stalin.htm

[11] See for example his *Soviet Impact on the Western World,* New York: The Macmillan Co., 1946.

[12] In a speech he made at a 'teach-in' in the United States in May 1965, Deutscher pointed out that after World War II the 'American colossus returned from the battle-field with barely scratch on his skin', whereas 'after all his battles and triumphs' Russia 'was more than half prostrate, bleeding profusely from his many wounds'. See his 'Vietnam in Perspective', https://www.marxists.org/archive/deutscher/1965/vietnam-perspective.htm.

[13] For more details on the relationship between the two men, see my 'E.H. Carr and Isaac Deutscher: A Very "Special Relationship"' in Michael Cox, ed., *E.H. Carr: A Critical Appraisal,* Palgrave, Macmillan, 2000, pp. 125–144.

insisted.[14] Meanwhile, Deutscher not only commented in great detail on Carr's growing corpus, but where necessary pointed out where the 'Prof' – as he often referred to Carr – might have gone wrong! Yet his regard for Carr always remained high. There was certainly no hiding his delight when Carr informed him in 1960 that he (Carr) was 'going to deliver' the prestigious Trevelyan Lectures in Cambridge the following year.[15]

Subsequently published under the somewhat unassuming title of *What is History?*, this shortest of Carr's many books not only went on to become one of his most successful in terms of sales, it was also widely and, for the main part, positively reviewed. It also acquired a massive worldwide readership, in part no doubt because unlike his *History of Soviet Russia* it was short, but also because he asked and tried to answer some very basic historiographical questions such as: what is a 'fact', can history ever be 'objective', what is a cause, what is the role of the historian in the writing of history, and whether or not what happens in history is the over-determined result of social forces outside humanity's control or the product of accident and the role played by certain key individuals.[16] Carr also delivered some well aimed broadsides at the historical establishment, and unsurprisingly some of them – Geoffrey Elton, Hugh Trevor Roper and Isaiah Berlin most obviously – responded, in turn accusing Carr of all manner of unpleasant historical deviations, including determinism, worshipping at the altar of power, amoralism, believing in progress and, sin of all sins, conceding too much to sociology![17]

Whether it was the widespread success of *What is History?*[18] or the fact that Carr and Deutscher were known to be close to each other, Roman Rodolsky decided to pen a reply to both. Written only a couple of years after the appearance of Carr's own volume of 1961, and at around the same time as the publication of Deutscher's

[14] 'Stalin', Thursday, 30 June 1949, *BBC, Third Programme*.

[15] Letter from E.H. Carr to Isaac Deutscher, 29 March 1961.

[16] Carr grappled with the problem of 'accident' in history for many years. He had always been critical of those more conventional historians who, in his view, saw 'history' as an 'inconsequential narration having no coherence and therefore no meaning for the present' (E.H. Carr, *The New Society,* Boston, Beacon Press, 1959, p. 11). The study of history, he insisted, was the study of 'regularities'; it was not 'patternless'. In fact, 'without pattern there can be no history ', though he added that if history did have a 'pattern' this was not 'inherent in the events themselves' but was 'put there by the historian' (ibid. p. 11). On the other hand, these regularities could from 'time to time' be interrupted by what he termed 'extraneous elements'. But as he made clear in *What is History?*, Carr clearly did not agree with either Marx or Trotsky, who in his reading argued that 'accidents' or 'great men' did not alter the general direction of history. As he noted, to believe, as they did, that accidents 'merely' accelerated or retarded history but did 'not alter' it, was, in his view 'to juggle with words' (E.H. Carr, *What is History?*, London, 2001, p. 96). As he later pointed out to Deutscher, 'the thesis that "accidents" either do not matter or cancel one another out, still does not satisfy me' (letter from Carr to Deutscher, 17 December 1963).

[17] For a brief discussion of the impact *What is History?* had on those whom Carr had been attacking, see David Caute, *Isaac and Isaiah*: *The Covert Punishment of a Cold War Heretic*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 2013, pp. 53–69. The 'heretic' in question was Deutscher, whom Isaiah Berlin, it seems, blocked for a post at the University of Sussex (ibid, pp. 275–90).

[18] *What is History?* sold well over 200,000 copies and went on to be translated into over 20 languages.

third volume on the life and times of Trotsky,[19] Rosdolsky (who was well known to Deutscher though only by correspondence to Carr) first sent his lengthy polemic to Carr. Carr was somewhat taken aback by the broadside, though quick to point out that even though Rosdolsky had attacked both himself and Deutscher on the central 'problem of accident in history', he had done so 'from opposite angles'. Carr, it seems, was less offended by the attack, more puzzled, possibly even irritated. Indeed, when sending on the Rosdolsky text to Deutscher he wondered whether his close friend might not be 'amused' by the piece; he also asked whether he could even 'bear to read it'.[20]

Deutscher of course knew Rosdolsky in ways that Carr never could – as a member of the wider (though deeply divided) Trotskyist family. Indeed, as the Rosdolsky papers held in the International Institute of Social History in Amsterdam show, there had already been an ongoing correspondence between Rosdolsky and Deutscher stretching all the way back to 1951 (and continuing until Deutscher's death). Deutscher in fact regarded Rosdolsky as an 'old friend'. More than that, in academic terms, he was, according to Deutscher, 'probably the best Marx scholar alive'.[21] Sadly though, he had what Deutscher termed a 'completely arid mind' immersed in Marxism, without ever being able to build any kind of bridge from 'classical Marxist texts' to what Deutscher called 'the events of the last forty years'. Rosdolsky might have been well informed about Marx and Engels, but he was also what Deutscher called an 'orthodox Trotskyist', the implication being that his mind was closed.

Still, judging by his correspondence with Carr, Rosdolsky's attack (which on close reading seemed to be much tougher on Deutscher than Carr)[22] clearly touched a raw nerve by suggesting, or at least implying, that Deutscher, 'a brilliant writer' and the 'well-known biographer of Trotsky', was a mere artist who only wrote biography.[23] More important still – and here we arrive at the nub of the matter about the role of 'chance and "great men" in history' – Deutscher denied something that Trotsky himself had much earlier claimed was self-evident: that without Lenin the October

[19] *The Prophet Outcast: Trotsky 1929–1940,* London, Oxford University Press, 1963.

[20] Quoted in a letter sent by Carr to Deutscher on 17 December 1963.

[21] Deutscher to 'dear Prof' (Carr) on 23 December 1963.

[22] In his critique Rosdolsky does not exactly spare Carr, who just did not understand dialectics according to Rosdolsky, a charge to which Carr would no doubt have pleaded guilty! As Carr once confessed to Deutscher, 'I fear that I am not a very good Hegelian and that like Bukharin I probably do not really understand dialectics' (letter from Carr to Deutscher on 17 December 1963). Even so, having berated Carr, Rosdolsky still has many positive things to say about Carr, noting that his *What Is History?* is 'brilliant', intelligent and profound 'far surpassing anything that contemporary historians have had to say on the matter'. He also goes on to praise Carr's *History of Soviet Russia*: nothing written in the USSR itself 'comes even close', Rosdolsky points out.

[23] The same point was made later by one of Deutscher's more sympathetic interpreters who pointed out, that if it was the case, as Deutscher believed, that great forces rather than great men made history, then why were his most important works – on Stalin, Trotsky and the young Lenin – all devoted to single individuals? From this perspective, 'his rejection' of the Great Man theory of history 'sits uneasily with his fascination with great men'. See Peter Beilharz, 'Isaac Deutscher: History and Necessity', *History of Political Thought*, 7:2 (Summer 1986), p. 382.

revolution would not have taken place.[24] By way of a response Deutscher did not so much deny what he had said but attempt to clarify it. It is quite possible, he confessed to Carr, that the original argument he had advanced in volume III of his Trotsky trilogy had given the 'somewhat wrong impression'. That said, there was no way that Trotsky's argument could be shown to be true one way or another. It was impossible to demonstrate 'that the Russian revolution would have taken place or that it would not have taken place without Lenin'. This he believed was counter-factual history, not history. Indeed, there was no way of knowing, and it was 'futile' to try and prove whether or not Lenin's role was (or was not) as crucial as Trotsky believed it had been back in 1917.

Of course, this was not the first time that Deutscher had been critical of Trotsky. Much earlier he had opposed the establishment of Trotsky's Fourth International – 'still born' he noted in an article published in 1948. In the same piece, he was also highly sceptical of Trotsky's unfinished biography of Stalin, 'one of the tragic documents in modern literature … not a biography but an indictment'.[25] Nor was Deutscher as convinced as Trotsky of the possibility of revolution in the West. If anything, Stalin, he insisted, may have had a 'more realistic appreciation of its revolutionary potentialities'.[26] Rosdolsky's critique therefore was more than just about Lenin's role in 1917, but rather an attempt to rescue Trotsky from his biographer, who at the time had an immense following, even amongst sections of the non-Stalinist left.

But at the heart of the discussion was not just a difference of opinion about what had happened in 1917 and why – though what happened and why did go on to shape the whole of the twentieth century – but the nature of Marxist theory and practice itself. This, one assumes, is why Rosdolsky wrote his long critique. To this extent, he was not only attempting to correct Carr and Deutscher on points of history or theory, but more importantly reassert what he regarded as the classical Marxist, and indeed Hegelian, view of the dialectical relationship between necessity and chance which he felt neither Carr or Deutscher understood.[27] Finally, he was also making the strongest case possible against a form of fatalistic Marxism represented, at least as he saw it, in the work of Deutscher – a fatalism which in his view denied the centrality of human agency in the making of history. The world of the human was, and is, quite unlike the natural world he insisted. As Rosdolsky pointed out (quoting from Engels whom he obviously admired), whereas in nature 'nothing happens as a consciously desired aim … in the history of society … the actors are

[24] The key passages in Deutscher where he criticizes what he calls Trotsky's 'startling conclusion' that without Lenin the October revolution would not have happened can be found in his *The Prophet Outcast*, pp. 240–251.

[25] Isaac Deutscher, 'Trotsky on Stalin', in *Heretics and Renegades*, London, 1955, pp. 89, 78, 79.

[26] Isaac Deutscher, *Russia After Stalin* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1969), p. 45.

[27] In his 23 December 1963 letter to Carr, however, Deutscher denied the charge, pointing out that Rosdolsky 'knows perfectly well that philosophically I accept the Hegelian-Marxist view on necessity and freedom or *Gesetzmässigkei*t and accident'.

all endowed with consciousness … working towards definite goals.' Trotsky, he insisted, had always understood this, even if Deutscher in his opinion did not.

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